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A History Essay is History

Chapter overview

- ▶ The historian seeks facts, but they are elusive and obscure at first.
- ▶ History is all about ‘debate and conflicting evidence’.
- ▶ History is a craft – it is about doing, not just seeing.
- ▶ History is an art – it requires imagination and creativity.
- ▶ History seeks understanding by exploring the *context* in time and space, and context expands indefinitely.
- ▶ A definition of history: the study of the past through the critical appraisal of recorded words.
- ▶ History differs in method and content from its various neighbouring disciplines.
- ▶ Social sciences seek increasingly exact measurements; history cannot avoid fuzziness in places.

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life.¹

I took the book list and the essay title, found the Radcliffe Camera [a library building at the University of Oxford at the time], began to read and perceived that I had been entirely misled for six years: history is fact only up to a point – more crucially, it is a matter of debate and conflicting evidence. It was like some kind of divine revelation: I went into the Camera a heathen and came out converted, but thought little of it, settling effortlessly into a new understanding, which is something that you can do at 18.²

History is, frankly, the most humane of subjects. The discipline of trying to understand the past and the character of change isn’t narrowly vocational – it provides an intensive training in critical thinking and communication, a portfolio of skills and sensitivities that can be applied to any walk of life.³

The first quotation above contains the famous words introducing Dickens’ novel *Hard Times*, spoken by a man who thinks only facts matter. This belief is rejected by the novelist Penelope Lively in the second quotation; for her, history is fact only up to a point. Real history is ‘debate and

conflicting evidence'. This does not mean that facts are unimportant. Historians love facts; they go through every manner of hardship tracing facts across all terrains and in all weathers. The mistake they do not make is to suppose that facts are easily found, and, when found, perceived to be clear and certain, as if made of stone. On the contrary, historical facts are remarkably elusive and commonly retreat into the undergrowth, leaving only ambiguous traces that require skill to interpret. They are real, but the evidence by which they may come to be known can never be exhaustively ascertained; we can never completely know them. It is working on history essays that brings the student most directly into a vivid and dynamic confrontation with 'debate and conflicting evidence'. This is why writing essays is so important; it fosters 'the training in critical thinking and communication' emphasized by Rees Davies in the third quotation above.

The practice of history is a craft

The study of history does not consist simply of learning facts. It involves a close encounter with debate and conflicting evidence. It involves manipulating ideas and interpretations, testing hypotheses, acquiring skill. You learn with your muscles, not just your eyes – that is, by doing, not just by seeing. You find out what history is by putting it into practice.

So the chief focus will be on active processes in which techniques are developed – reading for an essay, planning, drafting, revising, and then learning to do even better next time. It is a series of activities that teach by experience; it is a craft.

There is no substitute for experience, and the real learning process must take place in specific courses of study. This book offers advice about the techniques of historical craft; the practical application and the consequent learning are up to you.

History is also an art

These remarks may suggest that historical study follows a set of rules; but this needs to be qualified. No set of rules can by itself guarantee success in historical study and writing. The advice given here must always be adapted to practical experience. Anything in the following pages may be modified or even discarded by a teacher in accordance with the practical needs of a particular course of study. Nothing that follows here is to be treated as a rule that will make it impossible to go wrong.

Essays are judged essentially by how well their writers have understood what they have read and how well they can respond critically, economically and elegantly to that understanding. The literal-minded observance of rules can be an obstacle to these qualities. An essay is not a set of rote procedures like the routine checks made by a pilot before taking his⁴ craft into the air. An essay is unique; it should show originality and independence. It requires your own critical thought, responding to the nuances of the sources you have read, seeing implicit connections between facts and ideas, clarifying the essentials of a problem, even finding a new and interesting way of looking at it.

So you should cultivate originality and independent thought. But how? What about the details, the nuts-and-bolts problems of writing essays? How do you decide where to start? How much factual information is required? When is a footnote needed? How do you know when you have written enough? Such questions need answers. There is a need for guidelines to steer you through the problems of historical study.

This book will offer such guidelines, but guidelines are not iron rules. In later years, you may have forgotten all the details, but still be able to write good history essays. What makes essays good is not the rules they mechanically follow. Guidelines can support your work, like crutches, while the muscles of insight and judgment grow strong. Eventually, the crutches can be thrown away and you can step out independently; the rules you have learned will have blended into an instinct for what is obviously right.

A history essay is history

Why need there be a manual for study and writing in history, as distinct from English literature or philosophy or any other branch of the humanities?⁵ After all, good methods that work for one subject ought to work for another. This is true. What makes any essay good is the quality of the thought behind it, rather than its success in applying particular rules of history or any other discipline. However, different sorts of thought are needed for different disciplines.

So what is special and particular about history? This ought to be an easy question, but in fact historians all answer it in different ways.

Historians, like any other human group, develop their own working culture with its unquestioned assumptions and its prejudices. Newcomers need to find out what these assumptions are, but may find it surprisingly difficult to get satisfactory answers to their questions ('How do I avoid plagiarism?' 'Do I have to give evidence for this statement?'). Historians,

anxious to share with students their own intellectual delight in the most advanced and sophisticated approaches in historical research, may take the basics too much for granted. Explaining rudiments that one learned many years ago may prove difficult. The famous verse about the centipede encapsulates this difficulty:

A centipede was happy quite,
Until a toad in fun
Said 'Pray which leg moves after which?'
And worked her mind to such a pitch,
She lay distracted in the ditch
Considering how to run.⁶

Defining history

So, when historians try to explain what history is, they say many different things. Often they automatically offer advanced theoretical speculation rather than practical advice about the rudiments. Much has been written about the meaning of history, including debates about whether history can hope to find 'truth', and other more or less philosophical issues. These discussions, although important, are not the same thing as the basic rudiments of the subject, which are what concern us here.

What, then, is it that history basically does? An example will help. Below are four paragraphs on Machiavelli's political philosophy, which recommends to a ruler a tough, cynical approach to government. A historian could possibly have written any of these passages, but just one of them is basically historical. Which one? None is supposed to be better than the others – they are designed to illustrate different approaches, not superior technique. Which is the most *historical* one, and what makes it historical? It is worth taking time to look at the paragraphs and think about them, because the differences between them help to show how history is different from other disciplines.

- 1 Machiavelli accepted the principle that a state's survival transcends the interests of the individuals within it; this justifies all measures necessary to secure the state's survival. Upon this principle he erected a consistent and realistic, if harsh, theory of government that offered guidelines for a ruler. Like *The Prince* or not, we have to accept that Machiavelli's political philosophy is grounded in scientific observation.
- 2 We do not know enough about Machiavelli's childhood to understand properly how it may have affected his later outlook and values. However, we do know something about him that could have had a big effect on him – the effect of being held prisoner and tortured. Studies of

the psychology of stress show how trauma can shape deep-seated attitudes and determine an individual's whole construction of reality. Machiavelli's views of politics were inevitably influenced by his experience of imprisonment by the Medici.

- 3 Machiavelli's policies can be judged by the standards of several theories. According to a consequentialist theory, the value of an action is determined by the total of its results; if a ruler's policies result in the killing of innocent people but rapidly end a war, the harm done may be less than if no such policy had been followed, and justify Machiavelli's policy. A theory of categorical imperatives, on the other hand, may forbid killing innocent people regardless of the later consequences, and Machiavelli stands condemned. Again, Buddhist ethics might judge a deed by what is in the mind of its perpetrator: if a ruler's intentions were genuinely benevolent, this might excuse actions with harmful consequences.
- 4 Perhaps, if France and Spain had been superpowers threatening each other with nuclear weapons, conflict in Italy would have been kept in check by powerful kingdoms restraining their small client states from fear of mutual assured destruction, and Machiavelli would have lived in a more peaceful world with different rules of political behaviour. As it was, there was no such constraint. Northern Italian states were freely preyed on by the armies of bigger kingdoms and constantly disrupted by outside interference. No local state could hope for a stable and peaceful system of international relations. This is the environment which⁷ shaped Machiavelli's perceptions.

The four different comments here represent four different approaches to the study of Machiavelli, showing the methods and assumptions of four different academic disciplines. Just one of them places itself squarely within the domain of historical study.

Paragraph 1 treats him as a contributor to the philosophy or science of politics, discussing his views within a range of theoretical ideas about international politics. Whether or not it is a good contribution, the paragraph looks like political science.

Paragraph 2, by contrast, focuses narrowly on what went on inside Machiavelli. A historian might do this, but the paragraph appeals to psychological studies which relate severe stress to behaviour; it is thus basically psychology.

Paragraph 3 is, on the other hand, not about the way in which Machiavelli came to have his ideas (either by perceiving correctly the way things worked, or by having had certain experiences); it takes the ideas as given and considers whether they are good or bad. It thus identifies itself as moral philosophy.

We are left with paragraph 4, which accounts for Machiavelli's ideas by relating them to his historical environment. This shows the most clearly historical approach because it seeks to explain particular things (in this case, Machiavelli's ideas) within their own environment: where he lived, peace and stability were unobtainable, and this placed limits on what could be considered politically possible. Historians start with the particular environment of the object of study. They focus on the ways in which something is influenced by events in its own context. This is in contrast to paragraph 1, which talks about universal factors, not the particular context of northern Italy.

Thus, historical study begins with questions about the particular – a book, an idea, a person, a series of events, anything identifiable through historical sources. We examine it in its context, in its own environment; the context examined may broaden to include anything at all that might be relevant. We may look at earlier or later times to see whether similar causes produced similar results in other cases. However, when the broadening of context leads us into theories, for example about politics in general or the workings of the mind in general, we are moving into another discipline, such as political science or psychology. The main thing to remember is that history starts from the close examination of particular objects of study, seeking understanding of them within their own contexts.

This lays the groundwork for the task of defining history. Let us identify three stages:

Definition 1 History is the past.

This is true, but not helpful. The word 'history' refers sometimes to the past, sometimes to the study of it. What we are looking for in order to compare history with anthropology, music, linguistics and so on is a definition of a type of study:

Definition 2 History is the study of the past.

The problem with this is that any event whatsoever becomes past as soon as it has happened. Literature is past words. Observations of stars are observations of past events (often long past). Anthropologists may use the 'ethnographic present' tense in their writing, but for all that they are describing systems of thought and behaviour which were observed in the past, and may well be changing now (perhaps even as a result of the disruption caused by the anthropologist's presence). Geologists may find out about the history of the earth's crust from examination of ancient rock layers in the present.

What we need is something like this:

Definition 3 History is the study of the past through the critical appraisal of recorded words.

There is indeed an objection to this definition. Historians often study the past through the appraisal of things other than words, and such research includes some of the most interesting developments today.

Historians have been turning from their archives to the scrutiny of art and architecture, costumes and customs, rituals and recreations, diet and demography, indeed to any sort of interaction between people and their physical environment, often with the most rewarding results.⁸ A historian of social history through cinema may turn from the recorded words of the talkies to the images of the silent film, without ceasing to be a historian.

However, the apprentice in any art or craft must start by learning about the techniques and principles at the core of the subject; it is these which have given shape and structure to the practice of the vocation. The beginner must start with the basic techniques and principles.

The masters in the trade may have developed advanced techniques which do not obey the rules of the core principles. Meanwhile, however, the beginner is likely to end in confusion if he tries to jump to the most new and advanced sorts of practice. It is the old fallacy of seeking to run before you can walk. Therefore, it is best to leave the exceptions on one side and attend first to the core structures and principles.

History and its neighbouring disciplines

History is distinguished as a discipline, then, by the fact that its evidence typically consists of recorded words. The evidence may be in any form: books, newspapers, diaries, archives, bills, bus tickets, film soundtracks, tape-recorded interviews, shorthand notes, inscriptions on stone or tortoise-shell, or any other form of recorded words. For the historian, the record is a *source* or document, and *documentation* is the identification of these sources as verifiable evidence.

What the historian appraises critically is what his sources say. That is, he is interested in the meaning of the words, rather than in, say, their handwriting, or the chemical composition of the fabric on which they are recorded. History is about the meaning of what is written in the sources, and the light they throw on what was going on when they were written. Historical understanding advances by moving back and forth between the written sources and knowledge about the environments in which they were produced; each can help with the understanding of the other.

Various other disciplines stand close beside history, and the experienced historian may sometimes or often wish to raid them for what they may yield. The student does not need to worry about these other disciplines, at

least in the earlier stages. However, some of them need at least to be recognized:

- When the words of the document are in a language not the historian's own, he must double as a *linguist*. Most of the history of the world is of places that did not use English.
- *Philology* may be needed to interpret sources in dead or literary languages. This is the study of languages with attention to their historical development and the relations between them. In practice, philologists tend to be especially proficient in ancient languages, and it is a knowledge of these that is required for the history of the remoter past (e.g. Old English for early English history, Latin for European, Sanskrit for Indian).
- The historian may use as evidence any written sources, including literature generally; thus historical sources overlap those of *literary criticism*, but for the historian they are used in a different way.
- *Archaeology* is the study of the past using any sort of physical object as evidence, not just objects under the ground. Industrial archaeology, for example, studies buildings, sites, artefacts and any other physical evidence shedding light on the making, transport and use of products of any sort.
- *Epigraphy* is the study of inscriptions, typically on stone or metal. These are important for the study of periods when writing was known, but all writings on perishable materials such as paper have vanished.
- *Palaeography* is the study of the formation of characters and styles of writing at different periods in the past, by which, for example, a document may be roughly dated even if the date is not otherwise known.
- *Diplomatics* is the scientific study of written documents addressed to their physical characteristics; it includes forensic analysis of ink and paper which can yield facts of historical interest about date, authenticity and provenance. For example, a massive hoax during the 1980s involved the production of a large set of 'diaries' purporting to be Hitler's. The hoax, at first successful, was uncovered only after proper forensic examination became possible; for example, the ink used was of a type not available to Hitler, and measurement of the evaporation of chloride in the ink showed that the writings were too recent to be authentic. Here, diplomatic analysis aided history.
- *Social sciences*, such as *sociology*, *political science*, *psychology* and *economics*, often overlap in sources or subject matter with history, but their methods are different. There are sometimes subtle points of similarity and difference between mainstream history and historical topics in various other disciplines such as economics or anthropology. More comments on history and social sciences appear below.

Scholars in different disciplines often use each other's techniques; this lies behind many interesting developments in research, but it can be risky, and should not to be attempted lightly by the student.

Social sciences, humanities and fuzziness

Disciplines that are concerned with the study of people, culture and society can be divided into two classes: social sciences and humanities. (As noted above, the 'humanities' roughly correspond to liberal arts.) Sometimes history is regarded as a social science, sometimes not. How we regard it is quite important for our understanding of how it works.

Social sciences, unlike physical sciences, concern human society, but they are (partly) distinguished from the humanities because they seek to use scientific methods. They ask questions which can be answered fairly precisely by measurement. Thus, the degree of poverty or disease in a particular place or time is something which can be measured, so long as good enough statistics are available. Poverty and disease can then be compared in different places and times. Such measurements and comparisons belong to the studies of economics and sociology, which are core social science disciplines.

The humanities, by contrast, are concerned with culture, especially language and literature. Written documents and art forms are typical sources. Understanding is sought through refining ideas about the meaning of what is studied rather than through measurement of it. Ideas are not like statistics; they have fuzzy boundaries.

History can concern itself with questions belonging to both social sciences and the humanities. It cannot be decisively classified as of one type and not the other. However, it has deep roots in the humanities, and its core categories have fuzzy boundaries.

'Were more people literate in the eighteenth than in the seventeenth century?' is a question that can be answered by statistics, if they are available. But what happens if they are not? Then it is necessary to seek more indirect evidence, using inspired detective work; and this requires an imaginative search for clues among all sorts of historical sources.

'Was the frequency of wars in northern Italy a major influence on Machiavelli's thought?' cannot really be answered by statistics. The answer will not depend mechanically on a precise total of numbers of wars. It will depend in all sorts of ways on the character, frequency and effects of wars. There is no obvious way of measuring all the different ways in which warfare could affect people's minds and influence their worldview, or of deciding what would count as 'major'. In a sense, then, the idea of the frequency of wars as an influence on Machiavelli has fuzzy boundaries.

The importance of fuzziness cannot be overemphasized. It does not mean lack of rigour. The reason why a historian cannot put a percentage value on the importance of the frequency of wars in northern Italy to Machiavelli's thought is not that his method is sloppy; it lies in the nature of the question. Human ideas and behaviour might be influenced by anything at all within people's experience. The historian can seldom be sure that *all* the evidence that might be relevant has, in fact, been collected. The rigour lies in the thoroughness of the detective work conducted, not in the precision of calculations made using known facts.

History will always use statistics and precise measurements where these are relevant and available, but it will also want to explore the background, asking difficult questions about the effects of these measured quantities upon culture and experience. History will also be keenly interested in questioning how trustworthy the statistics are, looking into the ways in which they were collected and the behaviour of the people who produced and used them. A historical task is rarely completed when a column of figures has been added; real understanding usually requires more attention to human experience and behaviour.

So historical argument in a piece of research, or a student essay, does not take the form of formal proof, in the manner of an algebraic equation. On the contrary, it may always be challenged on the basis of further evidence. Evidence is all-important; the more of it there is, the better; but we should never think that we know it *all*.

One last point that will be worth recalling later: the writing of a historical argument (for example, in an essay) is *a dialogue with the sources*. It discusses the detective work that has gone into assessing them in order to provide material for the argument. Therefore, it must explain its conclusions about the value of the sources as well as its conclusions about the problem being discussed. These two sorts of explanation cannot always conveniently be carried on at once, and for clarity it is often necessary to separate the explanations of the value of sources in footnotes. This point is taken up in Chapter 12 (see p. 127).

The wavelength of history

This book is all about history as something with its own special character, different from sociology or economics or literature or any other discipline. How is it different? It is important to develop some idea about what makes history special. What this chapter may help you realize is how very *concrete*

history is. It is all about the actual evidence from which you can learn about people's actual ideas and behaviour. However far the historian may move away from the concrete sources into abstract generalizations or theories (and many historians are fascinated by big theories), the documentary evidence is always exerting a pull on his mind, and, in the end, what justifies his conclusions is his ability to show convincingly the value of the sources on which they depend.

Almost any statement about the past can be used in illustration. Here is one (that is discussed further in chapter 15):

The Indian emperor Akbar set out to disprove the doctrine of the court religious teachers that human beings are given speech by a divine gift, not by learning.

For most disciplines, this sentence would be taken as solid evidence, capable of being used as a building block in an argument. The student of religions would be interested in the theory of divine intervention in human affairs, the student of politics in the relationship between royal power and the authority of religious teachers and so on. But the historian automatically and instinctively turns, not to the theories – they come much later in his programme – but to the *evidence for the statement*.

He asks: 'How do we know this?', and immediately, rolling up his shirtsleeves, so to speak, burrows into the documentary evidence. Instead of taking the statement and using it as a building block for theory, he pulls it to pieces. 'What documentary source tells us this about Akbar? Who wrote it? Why? For whom? What does it tell us about the author? Did he have any axe to grind?' These are the historical questions which set the historian off on a quest that leads in the opposite direction to that taken by most other specialists.

If it turns out that the document making this claim about Akbar is misleading or untrustworthy, the comparative religionists, political scientists and the rest might lose interest, but that is just where the historian feels that things are becoming interesting. 'Why is the document misleading? What do we learn about society and politics in the India of the time from the fact that the author is not to be trusted? If he was biased, what gave him that bias? What was it *like* to be in the imperial court at that time?'

Thus, when you write history essays, you may make many generalizations and develop interest in theories, but they must always be anchored to an analysis of the actual hard evidence that is as detailed and specific as your time and your sources will allow. That is what makes your work history.

Questions

- 1 At the start of the chapter is quoted the view that history is a 'training in critical thinking and communication, a portfolio of skills and sensitivities that can be applied to any walk of life'. Is this borne out at all by your own experience? Does this view seem plausible to you, or might it be exaggerated?
- 2 Sometimes in schools history is taught in combination with other subjects such as geography or cultural studies. Is there anything wrong with this? How good an argument can be made for the case that history is unique and should be studied as a separate subject?
- 3 Should history be thought of as a sort of science?

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